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The Return to Shiloh: Family and Fantasy in Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh"

Greg W. Bentley

1 The criticism on Bobbie Ann Mason's fiction centers largely on the individual's relationship to society, on how culture–especially pop culture–influences the individual, particularly on how it shapes social roles or how it affects gender transformations.[1] Even though this issue is a fundamental element of her work, Mason, to a predominant degree, focuses on the individual's function *within* a smaller social unit: the family. That is, she more often than not concentrates on the individual's relationships to other family members and how these relationships positively or negatively affect the individual's psychic formation, how they affect the development of or the foreclosure on subjectivity. This relationship of the individual to the family, moreover, has fairly recently become the primary focus of psychoanalytic semiotics, most notably in the work of Kaja Silverman. While she does not neglect the individual's relationship to society–in fact, Silverman insists on "the necessity of reading sexuality in relation to the larger social order" (1), she nevertheless centers on the family as the *locus* of her interrogation of "libidinal politics," of what, she says, "might be called the 'politics' of desire and identification" (1). Libidinal politics, then, "articulates not only the legal, economic and religious, but the *psychic* ties linking parents and child" (39). More specifically, "[t]he ideology of the family defines the parents as privileged objects for desire and identification, and so works to eroticize precisely those relationships which kinship, in the guise of the incest prohibition, forbids. It promotes libidinal ties between brother and sister, and parents and children" (39). By looking at "Shiloh" from the perspective of the ideology of the family, I propose to map the libidinal politics of the Moffitt family.

2 "Shiloh" centers on the gradual disintegration of Norma Jean and Leroy Moffitt's marriage. When Leroy injures his leg in a traffic accident, he can no longer drive his 18-wheeler. Confined to the house to convalesce, Leroy passes time by smoking marijuana and putting together craft kits. In addition, some 16 years before Leroy's accident, Norma Jean and Leroy's infant son, Randy, died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Presumably,

as a result of these two incidents, Mabel, Norma Jean's mother, spends a good deal of time at her daughter's house. During Leroy's recuperation, moreover, Norma Jean begins a series of new activities: weight training, playing the organ, cooking exotic foods, and taking a composition course at the local community college. Unable to comprehend Norma Jean's "strange" behavior, Mabel decides that she needs a change of scenery, so she encourages Leroy to take Norma Jean on a second honeymoon to Shiloh, the Civil War memorial and battleground–which is also the site of Mabel's honeymoon and Norma Jean's conception. Mabel secretly hopes that the trip will rekindle Norma Jean and Leroy's marriage and family. Ironically, however, in the middle of their picnic lunch, Norma Jean tells Leroy that she wants to leave him. After walking away from Leroy, Norma Jean stands on the bluff that overlooks the Tennessee River. The story ends when she turns back to Leroy and waves her arms. Ostensibly, then, the story revolves around Norma Jean and Leroy's trip to the Civil War memorial of the same name. However, their trip, as I argue in this essay, functions only as the physical manifestation of a more important psychic trip: Mabel's fantasy–her imaginary return to Shiloh. That is, Mabel desires Norma Jean and Leroy to travel to Shiloh because the trip embodies her imaginary return to it, a fantasy that not only represents the unity of the family for her, but one that also signifies her own unity and adequacy–the wholeness and sufficiency of her subjectivity.

3 First, though, behind the action proper of "Shiloh," Mason posits the idea of the normative family, and it originates at Shiloh. In a reverie about the battle at Shiloh, Leroy thinks: "General Grant, drunk and furious, shoved the Southerners back to Corinth, where Mabel and Jet Beasley were married years later, when Mabel was still thin and good-looking. The next day, Mabel and Jet visited the battleground, and then Norma Jean was born..." (113-14). Although "spoken" by Leroy, this scenario articulates Mabel's idea of the normative family and her position in it as wife and mother; it is the *mise-en-scene* of her desire.

4 However, this family is not quite as normative or as unified as it first appears. As the narrator says, Mabel's husband, Jet, "died of a perforated ulcer when Norma Jean was ten" (110). While the narrator never states it overtly, the nature of Jet's illness and death suggests that perhaps there was a good deal of tension between Mabel and him and that he developed a habit of internalizing the stress to the point that it killed him. As the story unfolds, moreover, we see that perhaps Mabel was the primary source of that stress. From very early in her marriage, then, Mabel, in addition to being Norma Jean's mother, "usurps" the roles of husband and father. That is, even though she is biologically a woman, Mabel becomes the "man" in the family, and, as Silverman points out, "our 'dominant fiction' or ideological 'reality' solicits our faith above all else in the unity of the family, and the adequacy of the male subject" (15-16). By collapsing all three roles into one, Mabel not only ensures family "unity," but she also secures her adequacy and self-sufficiency within the family structure. She becomes the sole proprietor and the sole executor of the phallus.

5 When Norma Jean marries Leroy, a second form of the normative family comes into being. Very quickly, Norma Jean and Leroy have a baby, a son, Randy. With all the elements in place–father, mother, child–Mabel can assume her role as the doting grandmother. Her subjectivity–her positionality vis-a-vis the family structure--is secure, clear, and adequate. This family, too, however, is not quite as normative or as unified as it first appears. Norma Jean and Leroy marry because Norma Jean gets pregnant, a fact that not only shames Mabel but one that she entirely blames on Leroy. As Mason writes,

"Mabel has never really forgiven him for disgracing her by getting Norma Jean pregnant" (102). By overtly blaming Leroy for "appropriating" Norma Jean and by implicitly blaming him for dislodging her from her positionality within the normative family structure, Mabel succumbs to the conventional masculine *méconnaisance* necessary to maintain phallic identification. Lacan calls this misrecognition a "failure to recognize," and, as Silverman observes, this failure "can take two forms, depending upon its object; it can pertain either to the self or the other. The subject classically refuses to recognize an unwanted feature of the *self* by projecting it onto the other, i. e. by relocating it. He or she refuses to recognize an unpleasurable or anxiety-inducing aspect of the *other* by disavowing it, a process which sometimes requires the support of a fetish" (45). Mabel feels that Leroy has stolen Norma Jean from her, and thus *his* act destroys her initial idea of a "unified" family. Also, Mabel experiences a sense of diminishment as a result of Norma Jean's pregnancy. Thus, she feels a double sense of inadequacy; Norma Jean and Leroy's marriage minimizes her positionality as Norma Jean's mother and father, for Leroy has "stolen" her daughter, and Mabel's sense of disgrace marginalizes her sense of subjectivity because it creates a lack, a diminishment of her sense of her own wholeness and personal sufficiency.

6 In addition, the unity of this second "normative" family physically dissolves quite early as well, for Randy "die[s] at the age of four months and three days" (101). Just as she blamed Leroy for her loss of Norma Jean–and thus her place in the first family structure–Mabel blames Norma Jean for her loss of Randy–and thus the loss of her place in the second family structure. On one of her ritual Saturday visits, Mabel tells the story about how a "datsun" dog was put on trial for killing a baby and chewing its legs off while the mother was in the next room the whole time. Because Norma Jean is vacuuming in the next room and trying to block out her mother's tale–and the accusation implicit within it because she has obviously heard it before in a variety of similar stories–Mabel yells above the roar of the vacuum so that Norma Jean will *have* to hear the trial's verdict–and from Mabel's perspective its applicability to Norma Jean's treatment or mistreatment of her son–"they thought it was neglect" (107). For Mabel, the loss of her positionality within the first two family structures constitutes a form of castration. The physical and psychic losses which she experiences, however, function primarily as symptoms of an earlier, more profound, lack. As Silverman writes:

> [i]f, as Althusser suggests, the Law of Language represents 'the absolute precondition for the existence and intelligibility of the unconscious,' then it can best be understood in terms of the Lacanian binarism, 'your meaning or you life'–as the unavoidable castration which every subject must experience upon entering the order of language or signification, its inauguration into a regime of lack. This castration or lack entails both the loss of being, and the subject's subordination to a discursive order which pre-exists, exceeds, and substantially 'speaks it'. (35)

7 In effect, then, Mabel, by telling the story of the "datsun" dog, wields the phallus imperialistically not only to assert her power and privilege over her daughter, but also, and more importantly, she wields it tyrannically to try discursively to cover over *her* lack. By blaming Leroy for the loss of her place within the first family structure and by blaming Norma Jean for a similar loss within the second family structure, Mabel desires to keep her power and privilege by maintaining possession of the phallus. In order to do so, she has resorted to two of the conventional masculine strategies to cover over her castration: disavowal and projection.

8 Leroy's accident ironically creates a third family structure. While it appears to be a "normative" family on the surface, it in fact turns out to be quite abnormal, for its elements fail to conform to those of the typical family. Because of his wound, Leroy is forced to stay at home. Rather than create a bond, a renewed intimacy between him and Norma Jean, his presence ironically produces their complete estrangement. In Norma Jean's absence from Leroy, Mabel, who still plays the father/mother role in Norma Jean and Leroy's marriage, steps in to become Leroy's surrogate wife, and figuratively Norma Jean becomes their child. And Mason carefully crafts this third family structure. For example, Mabel not only spends an inordinate amount of time at Norma Jean and Leroy's house, but she and Leroy share the kitchen table more often and more intimately than do Norma Jean and Leroy. In addition, Leroy talks more openly and more personally with Mabel than he ever did with Norma Jean: "[o]ne day, Mabel is there before Norma Jean gets home from work, and Leroy finds himself confiding in her" (109). Their confidences, of course, focus on their "daughter," Norma Jean. As Mabel says, "'I don't know what got into that girl [...]. She used to go to bed with the chickens. Now you say she's up all hours. Plus her a-smoking. I liked to died'" (109). Indeed, within this family structure, Norma Jean feels like an adolescent caught between two well-meaning but oppressive parents. As Norma Jean tells Leroy, "'she [Mabel] won't leave me alone–*you* won't leave me alone [...]. I feel eighteen again. I can't face that all over again'" (113). Sensing not only the instability of this family structure, but also the insecurity of her positionality within it, Mabel tries to cover over the lack in her subjectivity by coercing Norma Jean and Leroy to take a trip to Shiloh, a journey that functions as Mabel's vicarious return, and one that she hopes will recreate the re-union not only of the unity of her normative family and her positionality within it, but one that will also construct a re-union of her subjectivity by covering over her lack and assuaging her desire.

9 For Mabel, then, Norma Jean and Leroy's trip to Shiloh will potentially construct a fourth family structure, and it is decidedly Mabel's fantasy family. That is, as Freud suggests in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the center of subjectivity lies in the unconscious, not consciousness. Freud considers consciousness as a repository for external stimuli, which then become psychically processed. Consequently, "reality", rather than being formed within the domain of consciousness, becomes established within the unconscious, the psychic space closed off from consciousness by repression. Thus, Freud illustrates not only how psychic reality rarely corresponds to "objective fact", but he also indicates how the subject attributes "reality" to representation. For the psyche, fantasy possesses all the power and truth-value of actuality (Silverman 18). If fantasy is "reality" for the subject, then, "that is because it articulates the particular libidinal scenario or tableau through which each of us lives those aspects of the double Oedipus complex which are decisive for us–because it articulates, in short, our symbolic positionality, and the *mise-en-scène* of our desire" (Silverman 18). Because she has lost her positionality within the dominant fiction and because she has lost her sense of wholeness, Mabel psychically becomes nothing and lives nowhere, but since every subject lives its desire from someplace, and it articulates its position by means of fantasy, the scene within which desire is staged concerns itself with the placement of the subject. Agreeing with Laplanche and Pontalis, Silverman contends that "fantasy is less about the visualization and imaginary appropriation of the other than about the articulation of the subjective locus–that it is 'not an *object* that the subject imagines and aims at... but rather a *sequence* in which the subject has [her] own part to play'" (6). Thus, the sequence of events that have produced the disintegration not

only of Mabel's concept of the normative family and her positionality within it, but also the disintegration of her sense of subjective wholeness compels her to construct a fantasy family that will restore her power, privilege, and positionality. By arranging Norma Jean's and Leroy's trip to Shiloh, Mabel initiates the sequence of events that she thinks will produce her re-integration–the unity of *her* family and her sense of wholeness and sufficiency within it.

10 Mabel hopes that the outcome of Norma Jean and Leroy's trip to Shiloh will be another baby, and, in this sense, their "virtual" baby functions as Mabel's fetish, her *objet petit a.* Describing the close connection between fantasy and fetishism, Silverman writes: "[f]antasy passes for reality at the level of the unconscious because it is propelled by desire for the foreclosed real. Although this desire, which is born with language, is fundamentally 'a desire for nothing,' fantasy defines it as a desire for something. It posits a given object as that which is capable of restoring lost wholeness to the subject" (20). Because she and Jet went there on their honeymoon and because Norma Jean was conceived there, Mabel manipulates Norma Jean and Leroy into taking the trip to Shiloh in order to overcome her lack and to fulfill her desires. Since fetishism is the third principal means by which the masculine subject tries to cover over his lack, Mabel fantasizes that Norma Jean and Leroy will on their trip to Shiloh fall in love again and conceive a "replacement" for Randy. By believing whole-heartedly in her fantasy/fetish, Mabel tries to ensure her psychic wholeness and her masculine positionality within the dominant fiction. As Silverman clearly points out, even though Freud overtly claims that a fetish functions as a psychic mechanism to defend the male against female lack, in his essay "Fetishism" Freud "implicitly shows it to be a defense against what is in the final analysis *male* lack. Since woman's anatomical 'wound' is the product of an externalizing displacement of masculine insufficiency, which is then biologically naturalized, the castration against which the male subject protects himself through disavowal and fetishism must be primarily his own" (46). Because Mabel so completely and so absolutely becomes a "man", she sets up a sequence of events–a fantasy–which includes a clearly defined fetish–by means of which she, like the conventional male subject, attempts to cover over her lack.[2]

11 When Leroy mistakenly thinks that Mabel has been hinting that she wants to go to Shiloh herself, Leroy suggests to Norma Jean that they all go. Before Norma Jean can speak, though, Mabel reveals her ulterior motive for suggesting the trip: "'I'm not going to butt in on anybody's second honeymoon'" (110). Although he remains largely unconscious of it, Leroy plays a complicit role in Mabel's fantasy. When Norma Jean tells Leroy that she wants to leave him, Leroy responds: "'you and me could start all over again. Right back at the beginning'" (113). Aware of Leroy's–and Mabel's–inadequacies, however, Norma Jean rejects the myth of the eternal return, for she tells Leroy: "'we *have* started over again [...]. And this is how it turned out'" (113). Norma Jean clearly rejects Mabel's fantasy. Indeed, rather than effect a re-union, Norma Jean takes the trip to get away from Leroy, Mabel, and the idea of conceiving another child.

12 Rather than bring Mabel's fantasy to fruition, then–a re-union of a normative family and the restitution of the wholeness and sufficiency of her subjectivity–the trip to Shiloh effects just the opposite. The normative family disintegrates completely and thus loses its function as the *mise-en-scène* of Mabel's desire. In addition, with the family's disintegration, Mabel loses her positionality within the dominant fiction. Ironically, even though Mabel wields power by playing the "man" and by appropriating the phallus, her

fantasy about Shiloh becomes the vehicle by means of which she executes her own figurative self-immolation. Rather than restore her sense of power, privilege, and presence within the family–and thus providing her with a sense of unity and wholeness--the trip to Shiloh effects her psychic castration and her absence within the symbolic order. At the end of the trip to Shiloh and at the end of the story–which are both her trip and her story--Mabel remains a desiring subject–and a subject of desire.

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NOTES

1. . See for example: Tina Bucher, "Changing Roles and Finding Stability: Women in Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories*"; G. O. Morphew, "Downhomme Feminists in *Shiloh and Other Stories*"; Leslie White, "The Function of Popular Culture in Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories* and *In Country*"; and Albert Wilhelm, "Private Rituals: Coping with Change in the Fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason."

2. . If Mabel's fantasy-fetish were to materialize, she would ironically seem to resume the classically "feminine" position within the reconstructed normative family–that of the doting grandmother. However, since Mabel, in each of the three previous family structures, has unilaterally and imperialistically wielded the phallus to ensure her power, privilege, and wholeness, we can only imagine that she would carry the pattern into the fourth family structure as well, for her fantasy-fetish defines her subjectivity and her positionality; they are the elements that constitute her desire and identification.

ABSTRACTS

C'est en considérant le concept de "la politique libidinale," établi par Kaja Silverman, que le Professeur Bentley démontre comment quatre structures familiales developpées par Bobbie Ann Mason dans "Shiloh" se conforment ou s'éloignent du modèle d'une famille normative. A première vue, l'histoire se concentre sur le voyage de Norma Jean et de Leroy au mémorial de la Guerre de Secession du même nom afin de raviver leur mariage et leur vie familale. Ce voyage, toutefois, n'est en fait qu'une manifestation physique d'un voyage psychologique bien plus important : c'est la vision de Mabel–son retour imaginaire à Shiloh. En d'autres termes, Mabel désire que Norma Jean et Leroy se rendent à Shiloh parce que leur voyage est l'incarnation de son propre retour imaginaire en cet endroit. Cette vision, en fait, représente non seulement l'unité de la famille telle qu'elle la conçoit, mais c'est aussi une vision qui exprime sa propre unité et sa compétence–la puissance et le privilège de réaliser sa conscience subjective